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OIPE JC77
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PATENT & TRADEMARK OFFICE

August 10, 1999

ATTORNEY DOCKET NO. 03384.0348

Box PATENT APPLICATION
Assistant Commissioner for Patents
Washington, D.C. 20231

Re: New U.S. Patent Application
Title: RECURSIVE IDENTIFICATION OF INDIVIDUALS FOR CASUAL COLLABORATIVE CONFERENCE
Inventor(s): Craig A. WILL

Sir:

We enclose the following papers for filing in the United States Patent and Trademark Office in connection with the above patent application.

1. Application - 21 pages, including cover page, two (2) independent claims and 45 claims total.

2. Drawings - Five (5) sheets of informal drawings.

3. A check for $1,210.00, representing $760.00 filing fee and $450.00 extra claims fee.

This application is being filed under the provisions of 37 C.F.R. § 1.53(f). Applicant awaits notification from the Patent and Trademark Office of the time set for filing the Declaration.

Please accord this application a serial number and filing date.

The Commissioner is hereby authorized to charge any additional filing fees due and any other fees due under 37 C.F.R. § 1.16 or § 1.17 during the pendency of this application to our Deposit Account No. 06-0916.

Respectfully submitted,

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ERY/RPP/kf
Enclosures

08/16/1999 DCHAN1 00000001 060916 09374200

Attorney Docket No. 3384.0348

UNITED STATES PATENT APPLICATION

OF

Craig A. WILL

FOR

RECURSIVE IDENTIFICATION OF INDIVIDUALS FOR CASUAL COLLABORATIVE CONFERENCING

60054 7681.5600

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RECURSIVE IDENTIFICATION OF INDIVIDUALS FOR CASUAL COLLABORATIVE CONFERENCING

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

A. Field of the Invention

The present invention relates generally to the field of telecommunications, and more particularly to casual collaborative conferencing.

B. Description of the Related Art

The World Wide Web (WWW), one type of service provided through the Internet, allows a user to access a universe of information which combines text, audio, graphics and animation within a hypermedia document. Links are contained within a WWW document which allow simple and rapid access to related documents. The WWW was developed to provide researchers with a system that would enable them to quickly access all types of information with a common interface, removing the necessity to execute a variety of numerous steps to access the information. During 1991, the WWW was released for general usage with access to hypertext and UseNet news articles. Interfaces to WAIS, anonymous FTP, Telnet and Gopher were added. By the end of 1993, WWW browsers with easy to use interfaces had been developed for many different computer systems.

UseNet is a network of news groups on thousands of different topics which allow the on-line discussion through the posting of individual messages (articles) which can be

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read by participants. An article is similar to an e-mail message, having a header, message body and signature.

Internet Relay Chat (IRC) is an example of a program that facilitates Web chat. "Chatting" is the term used for the network equivalent of the old telephone party line. IRC is accessed through an Internet connection. This technology permits the user to chat with users from all over the world about hundreds of different subjects at any time. In a way, it is as if the UseNet newsgroups were a live discussion group rather than postings.

The word "chat" may be somewhat misleading, because persons participating in a chat session are not necessarily speaking, but they are typing and reading text messages that chat participants write. Moreover, if the information communicated is not only in text form, but is real-time audio and video, chat rooms are better described by the term virtual space rooms. Once a person enters a chat room, which is really just a web page, that person can choose to only read the exchanges, known as lurking, or the person can join in and post messages.

Many chat rooms focus the conversation on specific topics, such as health, politics, and football. In that way, people with similar interests can find one another.

The first step for a person interested in joining a chat session, is to locate a chat room that interests the person. Once the person is on the web site (leading to the chat room), the interested person will usually be asked to register. For privacy purposes,

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people do not register using their real name, but instead people make up a name.

Once the person is equipped with a registration name, the person clicks a button and follows the instructions on the web site to choose a chat room, depending on the interests of the person. Joining a chat room is like walking into a room full of people talking to each other, sometimes with several conversations going on at once. Once inside the chat room, the person will probably find himself or herself in the middle of a conversation. There is no need to jump into the conversation. It is not uncommon for chat rooms to have many more lurkers than participants. As the interaction continues, new postings appear on the computer screen. When the person decides to join the conversation, all it takes is to type a message in a blank box in the screen and click a Talk button (or hit the Enter or Return key on the keyboard). Soon the message will be posted in the chat room and people may respond. In addition to chatting on a chat room where the text is broadcast to everyone on that chat room, there are ways to enter into a private chat.

A number of Internet phone software products offer voice capabilities in real time over the Internet. Internet phoneware vendors typically provide their own directory servers, organized by topic as well as by name. Voice quality varies from moment to moment. Such variations are due to the processing delay that results from encoding and decoding the conversation as well as the inherent delay of the Internet, which varies

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according to the amount of traffic at any given time and the route through which the signal must travel.

The Web chat is, however, only one level of an area of technology known as collaborative conferencing. Collaborative conferencing is the ability for two or more individuals to work together in real-time, in a coordinated manner over time and space by using computers. Collaborative conferencing is not limited to a live text exchange, but includes data conferencing/shared whiteboard applications, group interactive document editing, and audio and video multi-point conferencing among others.

The technique of Internet chat has the disadvantage that it is limited in the choices that individuals can make respecting whom they want to establish communication with. Namely, they have to join a chat room that has a specific discussion topic, and can only pick people in that chat room with whom to engage in a private chat. To solve this problem, a solution has been proposed and implemented, in which matches between different individuals connected to the WWW are created. This requires the inconvenient step of requesting information to the user, so as to create a user profile, and thus, perform matches based on those profiles.

Therefore, there is a need in the art for a system that offers more flexibility to individuals to choose other individuals with whom they want to engage in a conversation, the conversation not being limited to a conventional Internet chat (text).

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SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

Accordingly, it is an object of the present invention to meet the foregoing needs by providing systems and methods that efficiently enable real-time communication among two or more individuals separated in space.

Specifically, a method for meeting the foregoing needs is disclosed. The method includes the steps of determining that a first individual is likely to be interested in communicating with a second individual via a first communications link; retrieving information via the first communications link about one or more additional individuals from electronic memory means associated with the second individual; and establishing communication with at least one of the additional individuals based on the retrieved information.

Both the foregoing general description and the following detailed description provide examples and explanations only. They do not restrict the claimed invention.

DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The accompanying drawings, which are incorporated in and constitute a part of this specification, illustrate embodiments of the invention and, together with the description, explain the advantages and principles of the invention. In the drawings,

FIG.1 is a block diagram of a collaborative conferencing system;

FIG.2 is a block diagram of a computer system associated with user A in FIG.1;

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FIG.3 is an example of an user's personal directory according to the present invention;

FIG.4 is a flowchart describing the steps to establish real-time communication according to the present invention; and

FIG.5 is a diagram showing a second mode of operation of the computer system in FIG.2.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

Reference will now be made to preferred embodiments of this invention, examples of which are shown in the accompanying drawings and will be obvious from the description of the invention. In the drawings, the same reference numbers represent the same or similar elements in the different drawings whenever possible.

Systems and methods consistent with the present invention perform collaborative conferencing by using recursive identification of individuals. For purposes of the following description, the systems and methods consistent with the present invention are mainly described with respect to Internet chat. The description should be understood to apply to other levels or modes of operation in a collaborative conferencing system, such as a casual collaborative conversation with persons in a virtual space room.

FIG.1 shows a general collaborative conferencing system 100. The system includes communication means associated with users A-F (10, 12 and 16-19), a Wide Area Network (WAN) 14, and a chat server 22. The WAN 14 is any network that is

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capable of transferring data at speeds fast enough as to support collaborative conferencing. An example of a WAN is the Internet. The chat server 22 is a computer connected to the WAN 14 that offers a chat service. That is, the chat server 22 runs software that enables the creation of a chat room. The users A-F can enter the chat room if connected to the chat server 22. As mentioned above, a chat room is nothing more that a web page, which in this case is supported by the chat server 22. By contrast, supporting a virtual space room might require equipment other than a single server. Support for the virtual space room can be offered by several servers (not shown) that are part of the WAN 14.

In the system 100, user A determines that user B is a person that is likely to be interesting enough so as to get involved in a casual collaborative conversation with that person. That is, if user A believes that he or she shares common interests with user B, user A will engage in collaborative conferencing with user B. This determination is made after obtaining information about user B. The information is obtained by communicating with user B. The manner in which user A communicates with user B in order to determine whether he or she is likely to be interested in communicating with user B (possibly via some other communication means or links) includes, but is not limited to, telephonic conversations, e-mail, voice mail, real-time video, and real-time text.

Once user A determines he or she is likely to be interested in communicating with user B, user A targets or spots user B when user B enters into a chat room or virtual space room. User A will see on his computer screen (208 in FIG. 2) either the name or an

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image of user B whenever user B is "on-line". Each user in the system 100 has a personal directory 20 containing the names of other people with collaborative conferencing capability.

Unlike conventional methods of matchmaking in a chat room context, user A does not rely on a computer program to pick interesting persons for him or her. Instead, user A relies on user B's personal directory 20 as a starting point to find more interesting persons. User A accesses some of the information contained in directory 20 about other users with collaborative conferencing capability, with whom user B communicates. This technique is called recursive identification of individuals. The information that user A can access is limited according to permissions assigned to each record in the directory by user B.

FIG.3 shows an example of different permissions designated by user B. The directory 20 contains individual records 300-304 that correspond to individuals with collaborative conferencing capability. The list of users (300-304) is by no means extensive and is not representative of all of the possible users that could be included in the directory 20. Records 300-304 contain user information that includes, but is not limited to, users' e-mail address, users' names and virtual space room login names, picture id's, etc.

There are different levels of permissions that the user B can assign to the users records (300-304) in the directory 20. Because any other user of the system in the present invention can get access to some information, user 12 assigns access permissions to

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records 300-304. These permissions define how much information can be accessed by the other users via their respective communications means (10 and 16-19 in FIG. 1).

One level of access corresponds to the type of service that is used within the system. In FIG.3, the record 300, corresponding to user C, can be accessed by the entire public that communicates with user B via Web chat (e.g., a chat server 22). The term "public" refers to all of the persons with collaborative conferencing capabilities. On the other hand, when another level in collaborative conferencing is in use, namely, video conferencing, only users A and D can access record information 300 about user C from user B's directory 20.

Other levels of permissions include, but are not limited to, giving the public access to the entire directory 20, giving specific persons access to the entire directory 20, giving the public access to information contained in some of the records 300-304, and giving specific persons access to information contained in some of the records 300-304.

The directory 20 can be created by user B manually. That is, user B can gather a list of names of individuals that he or she communicates with, and enters that list into the directory 20. In the present invention, an alternative to manually creating the directory is to have the software that enables collaborative conferencing create the directory 20 for the user. The software has a routine that monitors the communication between user B and other users (e.g., C-F) and that adds to the directory 20 information about the users that communicate with user B. As an option, the software can sort the information in the directory 20, according to the frequency of the communications between user B and the

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individuals named in the directory 20. Moreover, another option consists of automatically deleting information from the directory 20, when the software determines that persons that do not communicate frequently with user B, have not actually communicated with user B for specified period of time. For example, the software could look at the sorted directory 20, and determine whether the individual whose information is at the bottom of the directory (less frequency) has communicated with user B in the past two months. If the person at the bottom has not done so, that person's information is deleted from the directory 20. The period of two months is only an example of a parameter that can be adjusted according to the directory's owner preferences.

FIG.2 shows communication means 10 for enabling communication between user A and other users (e.g., users B-F) of the system 100, and that corresponds to user A in this particular example. The communication means 10 includes a computer system 202 with a keyboard 206 and a screen 208; and a speaker 204, camera 212, and microphone 210 connected to the computer 202. The computer 202 runs software that displays on screen 208 a representation of other users 220-222 present (on-line) in a virtual space room. The ability of communicating with these other parties in real-time via the computer system 202 is what makes the system a collaborative conferencing system.

The computer 202 only displays an image of those users that have been determined to be of interest to user A 10. As seen on FIG.2, user A has determined that he or she is likely to be interested in communicating with users C, E and F. The representation of users C, E and F in the computer screen is denominated by numerals

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220-222, and it includes image information as well as other personal information about the users. User A uses different means to communicate with any of the users in the virtual space room. These means include, but are not limited to, voice, interactive text (chat), e-mail, and video.

The speaker 204 is used for listening to voice messages sent by the users in the virtual space room. On the other hand, the microphone 210 is used to send voice messages to users in the virtual space room. These voice messages are either voice mail messages, stored either locally in the computer 202 or in some other recording means, or real-time voice messages (i.e., real-time telephony).

The camera 212 is used to capture an image of user A, which is presumably displayed in the computer screen associated with other users participating in the virtual space room. The camera 212 is turned off when user A does not desire to transmit an image of herself/himself. It is possible to have a participant in the virtual space room that does not want his or her image displayed. For example, a chat window 224 displays interactive text communications between user B and user A. As seen from the display, an image of user B is not shown in the screen 208. The chat window 224 is used by any of the users in the virtual space room, and its use is limited to displaying text messages from all of the parties, as it would for a conventional chat room.

When user A decides to communicate via interactive text, he or she needs to type the message on the keyboard 206. The user can edit the entered text which is displayed

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on the window 228. After the changes have been entered, the text is displayed on the chat window 224 when user A hits the button 226 displayed on the screen 208.

By comparing FIG.2 and FIG.3, one notices that the image representations 220-222 displayed on screen 208 of user A's computer system 202 match the permissions associated to users C, E and F (300, 302 and 303 in FIG.3). As discussed above, user A has determined that user B is likely to be an interesting person. This is evidenced by the interactive text exchange between user A and user B, shown in windows 224 and 228 of FIG.2. It is also evident from FIG.2, that user A could have accessed the directory 20 in order to access information about users C, E and F. Thus, user A determined that users C, E and F are also likely to be interesting. User A could have also determined that user D is likely to be an interesting person, even though user D is not displayed on screen 208. Only users that are on-line are displayed on the screen 208.

FIG.4 shows a method for performing collaborative conferencing in accordance with the present invention. In step 401 a first user determines which persons are likely to be interesting. As discussed previously, this determination can be done for a single person, and then the determination of additional persons likely to be interesting can be expanded by looking at the directory of the first persons determined to be likely interesting. In step 402, the first user accesses the personal directory of one of the likely interesting persons. This step is not limited to the first person that was determined to be likely interesting. Once a list of likely interesting persons have been put together by the first user, he or she can go into the directory of any of the individuals in that list.

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After the first user has determined likely interesting persons and has accessed the directory of a first likely interesting person, the first user establishes communication with the persons who are determined to be likely interesting. This communication takes place in a virtual space room context.

FIG.5 shows an alternative embodiment of the present invention. The software running on the computer 202 allows persons in a virtual space room to be separated in subgroups. These subgroups are displayed 501-503 on the computer screen 208. Persons in Group I 501, cannot communicate with persons outside Group I 501 (Group II 502, Group III 503). Assuming that user A belongs to Group I 501, user A can still see in the computer screen 208 who is in the other groups. If user A wants to communicate with individuals from the other groups, user A must change groups in order to accomplish the desired communication. For example, if user A is in Group I 501, and notices that user B (a person that is likely to be interesting) is in Group II 502, user A would have to enter Group II 502 in order to communicate with user B. Once user A transfers to Group II 502, an image representation of user A would appear in the area of the computer screen that corresponds to Group II 502.

The foregoing description of preferred embodiments of the present invention provides illustration and description, but is not intended to be exhaustive or to limit the invention to the precise form disclosed. Modifications and variations are possible in light of the above teachings or may be acquired from practice of the invention. The scope of the invention is defined by the claims and their equivalents.

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WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. A method for real-time communication among two or more individuals separated in space, comprising the steps of:

determining that a first individual is likely to be interested in communicating with a second individual via a first communications link;

retrieving information via the first communications link about one or more additional individuals from electronic memory means associated with the second individual; and

establishing communication with at least one of the additional individuals based on the retrieved information.

2. The method of claim 1, wherein the step of determining that a first individual is likely to be interested in communicating with a second individual via a first communications link comprises the step of:

establishing communication between the first individual and the second individual.

3. The method of claim 2, wherein the communication established between the first and second individuals is carried out by telephony.

4. The method of claim 3, wherein the communication established between the first and second individuals is by real-time telephony.

5. The method of claim 2, wherein the communication established between the first and second individuals comprises exchanges of voice mail messages.

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6. The method of claim 2, wherein the communication established between the first and second individuals comprises exchanges of text messages.

7. The method of claim 2, wherein the first and second individuals communicate via real-time video.

8. The method of claim 2, wherein the first and second individuals communicate via interactive real-time text communication.

9. The method of claim 1, wherein the step of determining that a first individual is likely to be interested in communicating with a second individual comprises the steps of:

displaying a representation associated with the second individual to the first individual; and

selecting the representation by the first individual.

10. The method of claim 1, wherein the information retrieved from electronic memory means associated with the second individual is organized in a personal directory included in the electronic means.

11. The method of claim 10 wherein the information about one or more individuals in the personal directory is entered manually by the second individual.

12. The method of claim 1, wherein the information in the memory is obtained by observing previous communications between the second individual and one of the individuals in the memory.

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13. The method of claim 12 wherein the information is organized in a personal directory included in the electronic memory.

14. The method of claim 12, wherein the communication established between the second individual and one of the individuals in the memory is carried out by telephony.

15. The method of claim 12, wherein the communication established between the second individual and one of the individuals in the memory is by real-time telephony.

16. The method of claim 12, wherein the communication established between the second individual and one of the individuals in the memory comprises exchanges of voice messages.

17. The method of claim 12, wherein the communication established between the second individual and one of the individuals in the memory comprises exchanges of text messages.

18. The method of claim 12, wherein the second individual and one of the individuals in the memory is by real-time video.

19. The method of claim 12, wherein the communication established between the second individual and one of the individuals in the memory communicate via interactive real-time text.

20. The method of claim 12 wherein from observing previous communications between the second individual and one of the individuals in the memory, the frequency with which the second individual communicates with the individuals in the memory is

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determined, and the individuals are sorted in the memory according to the frequency of communication.

21. The method of claim 20, wherein the individuals in the memory that do not communicate frequently with the second individual are deleted from the memory after a certain amount of time.

22. The method of claim 10, wherein the second individual sets permissions associated to the access of the personal directory by others.

23. The method of claim 22, wherein the permissions set allow the personal directory associated with the second individual to be accessed by the public.

24. The method of claim 22, wherein the permissions set allow the personal directory associated with the second individual to be accessed by specific persons or group of persons designated by the second individual.

25. The method of claim 22, wherein the permissions set make public a plurality of individual records, each record containing information corresponding to each of the at least one individuals.

26. The method of claim 22, wherein the permissions set make available, to specific persons or group of persons, a plurality of individual records, each record containing information corresponding to each of the at least one individuals.

27. The method of claim 22, wherein the permissions set for a given directory vary according to a mode of use in a collaborative conferencing session.

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28. The method of claim 13, wherein the second individual sets permissions associated to the access of the personal directory by others.

29. The method of claim 28, wherein the permissions set allow the personal directory associated with the second individual to be accessed by the public.

30. The method of claim 28, wherein the permissions set allow the personal directory associated with the second individual to be accessed by specific persons or group of persons designated by the second individual.

31. The method of claim 28, wherein the permissions set make public a plurality of individual records, each record containing information corresponding to each of the at least one individuals.

32. The method of claim 28, wherein the permissions set make available, to specific persons or group of persons, a plurality of individual records, each record containing information corresponding to each of the at least one individuals.

33. The method of claim 28, wherein the permissions set for a given directory vary according to a mode of use in a collaborative conferencing session.

34. A collaborative conferencing system comprising:

a large virtual space room;

a display for displaying in real-time a representation of only those persons in the virtual space room who have been defined as likely to be interesting; and

means for establishing communications with the persons in the virtual space room.

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35. The system of claim 34, wherein the representation of persons includes information about the persons.

36. The system of claim 34, wherein the collaborative conferencing system is set to a mode of random casual conferencing, the random mode enabling the communication between two persons that seek an interesting but otherwise random conversation.

37. The method of claim 36, wherein the communication comprises two-way audio conferencing.

38. The method of claim 36, wherein the communication comprises two-way interactive text communication.

39. The method of claim 36, wherein the communication comprises email exchange between the two persons.

40. The method of claim 36, wherein the communication comprises voice mail message exchanges between the persons.

41. A collaborative conferencing system comprising:

a large virtual space room comprised of persons from the general public or from private groups or organizations;

a display for displaying in real-time a representation of persons from the virtual space room; and

means for establishing communications with the persons in the virtual space room.

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42. The system of claim 41, wherein the communications can be established via text conferencing or via audio conferencing.

43. The system of claim 42, wherein the group of persons that form the virtual room are partitioned into subgroups.

44. The system of claim 43, wherein persons in a subgroup only communicate with persons within that subgroup.

45. The system of claim 44, wherein a person in a subgroup can transfer to another subgroup after looking at the existence of other subgroups in the display and determining another subgroup of interest.

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ABSTRACT

A method for real-time communication among two or more individuals separated in space. The method includes the steps of determining that a first individual is likely to be interested in communicating with a second individual via a first communications link; retrieving information via the first communications link about one or more additional individuals from electronic memory means associated with the second individual; and establishing communication with at least one of the additional individuals based on the retrieved information.

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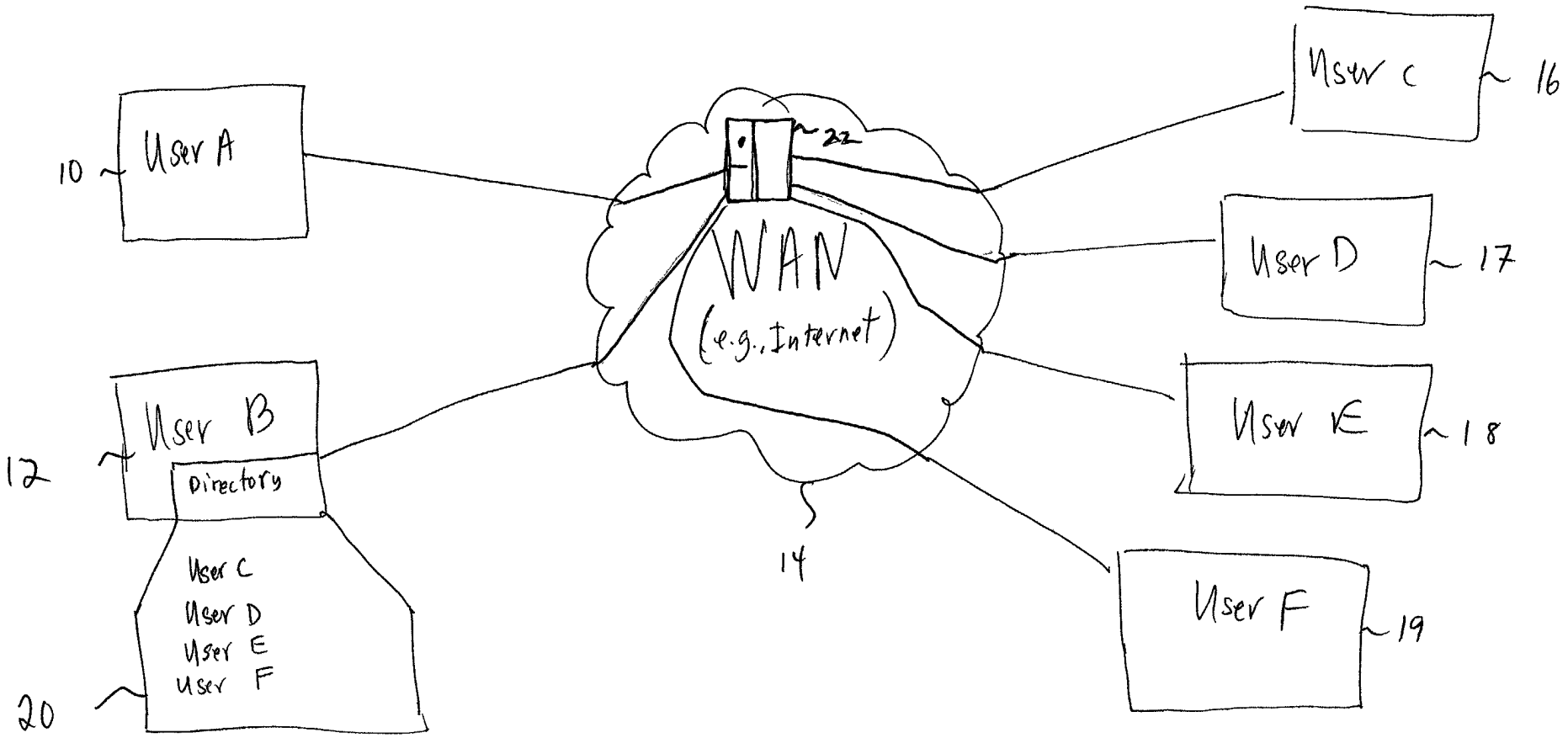


FIG. 1

100

09371781.081099

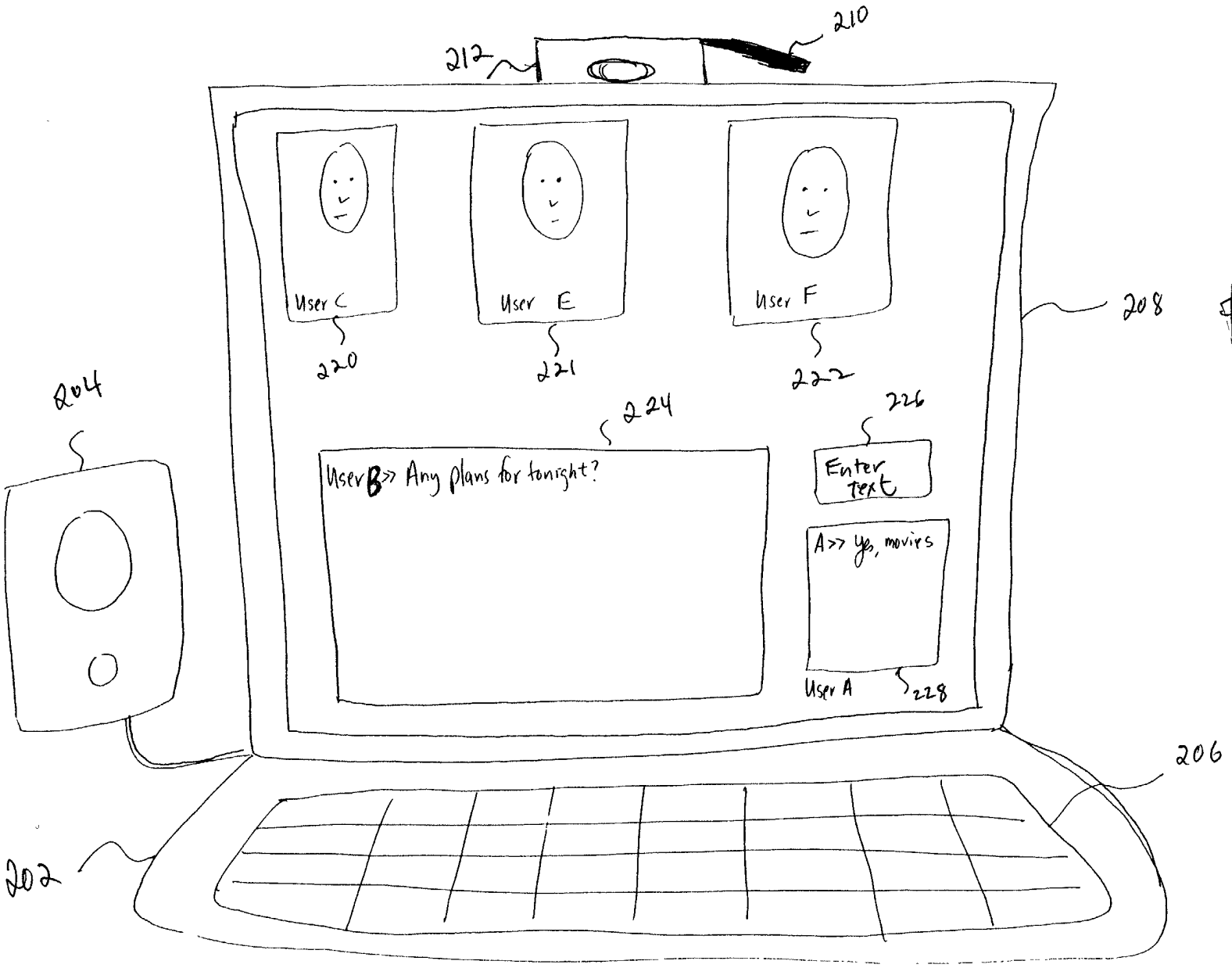


FIG. 2

10

09371781.081099

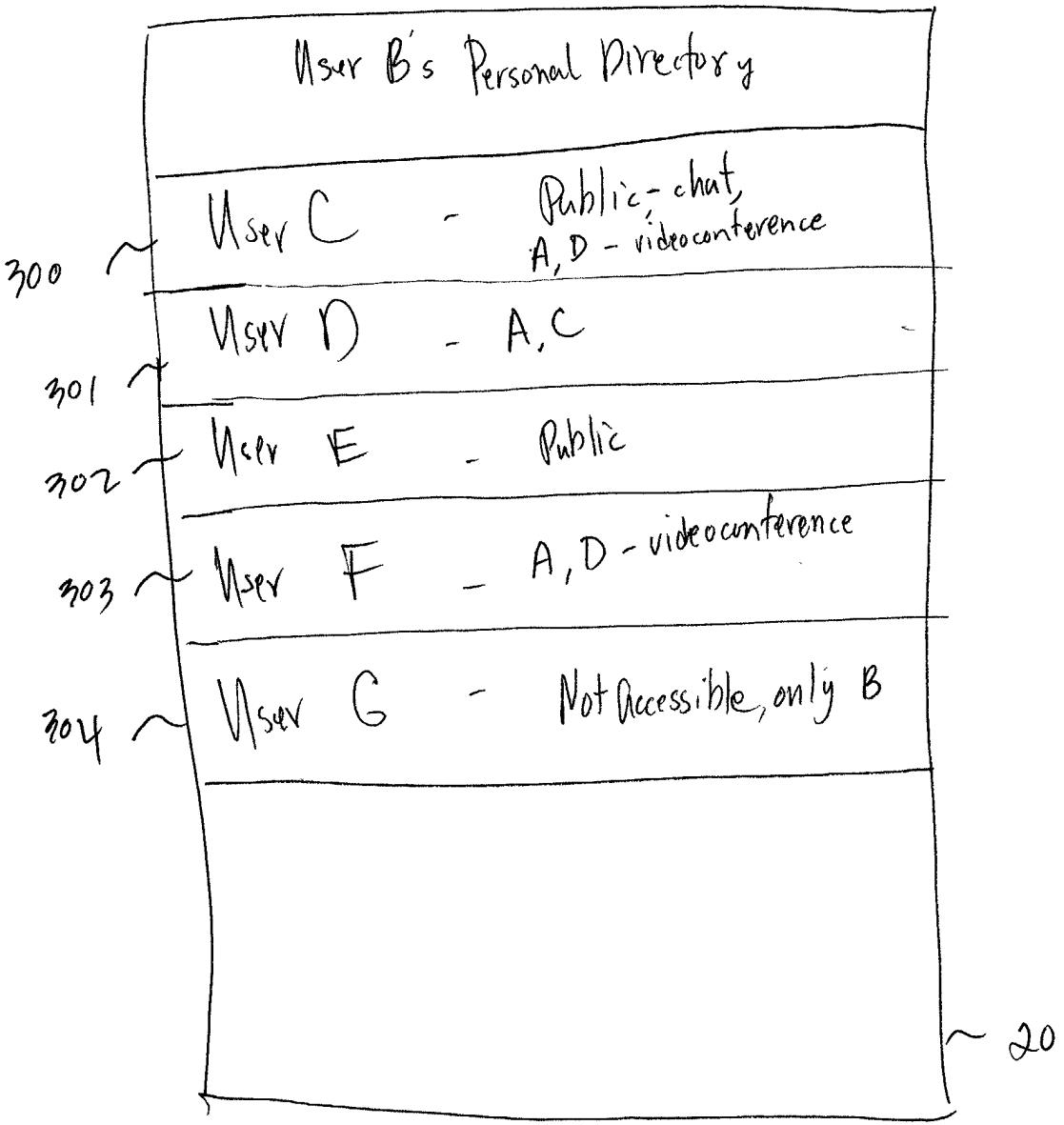

User B's Personal Directory
User C - Public - chat, A, D - videoconference
User D - A, C
User E - Public
User F - A, D - videoconference
User G - Not Accessible, only B
300
301
302
303
304
20

FIG. 3

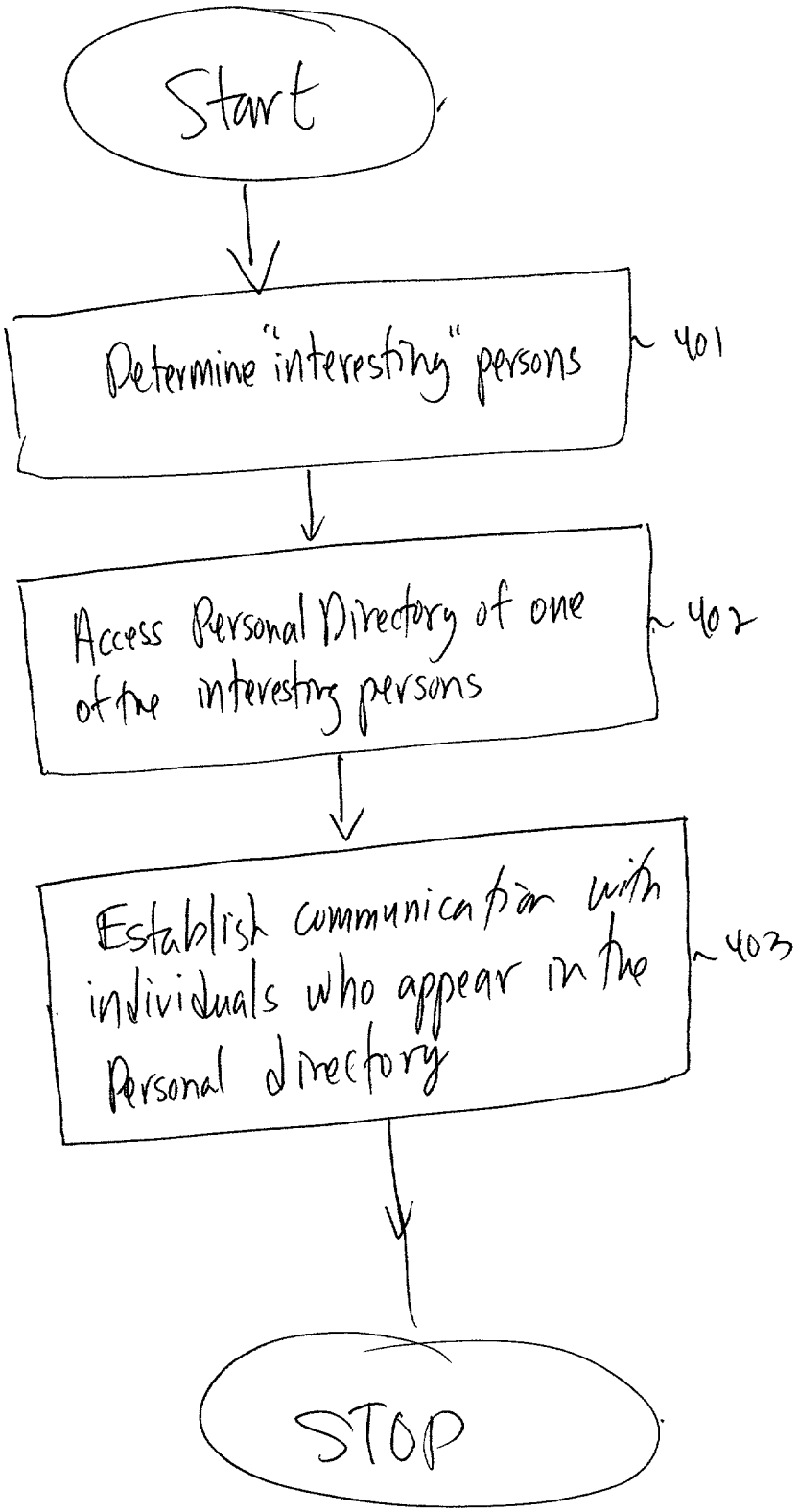

Start
Determine "interesting" persons
401
Access Personal Directory of one of the interesting persons
402
Establish communication with individuals who appear in the Personal directory
403
STOP

FIG. 4

FIG 5